

10.

THE STATION

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*Our age is on the eve of a revolt against property, in the name of the common claim of all to a common share in the results of the common labour of all.<sup>1</sup>*

—Charlotte Wilson, “Freedom”

*but this is your hour, and the power of darkness.<sup>2</sup>*

—Luke 22:53

The train has already left the station. The shadows within are waiting for nothing. The station is the zero point of white power. Progress is measured by how long the train’s been gone. The lines all lead toward white power.

Railways are built on high ground. Whiteness is wealth and wealth lives above sea level in New Orleans. Poverty casts its black shadows into the depths. The flood was no accident. As the psychoanalysts so often repeat, there are no accidents. The unrepaired levee was the instrument by which the whites dispossessed the blacks of the depths and cast them into yet deeper waters.

On August 27, 2005, the last Amtrak train left the station filled

with equipment but without any passengers. On the twenty-eighth, evacuation was made mandatory. On the twenty-ninth, the levee was breached. On September 11, in the *Washington Post* and on NBC's *Meet the Press*, the mayor and Amtrak would each deny responsibility for the *last empty train*. The last train, of course, hardly mattered in the overall tragic scene. Why trains, plural and modern and fast, were not running around the clock to evacuate everyone remains an unasked, and unanswered, question. Not until October 9, when a train called the City of New Orleans pulled into the station, was railway service restored to New Orleans, and the return of railway service is not an answer to the question of why service was ended when it was needed to save lives.

In New Orleans, the color line separates the drowned from the saved, and that line was laid a long time ago. Amtrak could have been used to save people from the flood. It was not. That decision was also made a long time ago. To understand why the railway was not used, and why the levee was allowed to break, and the market for the horrifying spectacle that followed, one must travel backward in time.

New Orleans was a slave market. Black was the mark used to differentiate owners from owned. The blacks were for sale. The mark was a pleasure and a passion. It was such a pleasure that it kept coming undone. Hierarchy based on racial marking expressed itself as rape and then as the reproductive undoing of the already-fictional biology of racial difference that kept white over black. Hierarchy expressed itself as rape and forced reproduction, and forced reproduction meant whites who were not so white and blacks who were not so black. All of which fueled the passion for racial marking all the more. This passion was the market.

The owner owns in order to be an owner. Ownership is an expe-

rience of the flesh; it enters the flesh through the mark. Ownership, then, is pleasure and can be felt only through the pain of the dispossessed, and the pain of dispossession can be felt only through the pleasure of the owner. These are pleasures and pains of comparison. The suffering and surrender of the dispossessed is necessary for the owner to experience the pleasure of ownership. Ownership, moreover, is addictive. Where the pleasure of ownership expressed itself through rape and forced reproduction, the children of this dispossession were sold as slaves on a specialized market, one for racially indeterminate sex slaves, centered in New Orleans.

Modern progress measured itself station by station and rail by rail as new lands and new peoples, new accumulations, were ever more speedily brought to the market. The market expanded as it ever more speedily gathered everything into itself. The expansion of the market was the forward progress of the owners. The locomotive thus arrived in the world as a thing of beauty and a joy forever, but not to everyone and not everywhere.

The railway splits the land, and white worms, monstrous from their feast, crawl out of this fatal injury to the commons. The parasites lay hold of the entire world. Middle Passage and Manifest Destiny, Infinite Justice and Enduring Freedom; this is the way the world ends, with the division of the commons and the marking of bodies for ownership and dispossession.

I use the metaphor of the railway to show the way that race and class were both put in place, like parallel rails, for the same purpose, to carry the white owners across the land and into the future. I use the metaphor of the station to show the futility of waiting. I use the psychoanalytic concepts of "trauma" and "screen memory" to describe why black people continue to turn to the law even though the law has never led them anywhere. I use the idea of "free

association” to show a way for black consciousness to cease its repetitive return to the legal tracks and instead turn to mutual aid and direct action.

The conflict over space—over what is to become of the city of New Orleans—obscures the conflict over time. Ownership divides space into *mine* or *yours* or *his* or *hers* or *theirs* or *ours*. The division that gives rise to the property relation must first be made on the flesh. Property must be written on the body because before we are divided into *haves* and *have-nots* we are all, equally, held by and holders of the skin we are in. Without the marking of bodies there can be no division into owners and dispossessed. At the level of economy, the relation between owner and dispossessed is parasitic; the former is the parasite of the latter. The inaugural mark of our system of property relations was written on black flesh with steel chains. The chains marked and continue to mark the division of the body into white over black. The marks laid down in white over black, once set in place, continue forever into the future like rails to infinity; the train can travel only to the station.

Whites own the areas above sea level in New Orleans. Owners always want more, so the dispossessions, once they begin, continue parasitically until the host is dead. Whites need to take continually from blacks. Owners transform all of nature into property, that is, into a means for further dispossession. Congressman Richard Baker seemed to celebrate the loss of black life as the miracle of white wealth. In his own words, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Unoccupied housing is still empty in dry areas of New Orleans. The whites are returning and blacks are still being kept out. Plans have already been presented to transform black areas of the city’s Lower Ninth Ward into water-retention plains to protect white, wealthier areas.

There were no race relations before the violence of accumulation; the violence of ownership gives us our first sense of the otherwise quite unremarkable—because unfetishized—difference in the color of the skin we are in. Ownership does something else as well. Ownership also makes us forget that things were not always this way. This is something it accomplishes by creating a time out of mind, a memory of humankind that runs only on the rails of capitalist necessity and no others. Ownership is also the conquest of time.

“God gave Noah the rainbow sign. No more water, the fire next time!”<sup>3</sup> Time, like space, is *theirs* or *ours*. Time, the slaves perceived, through the crystal of their dispossession, is white over black. The genealogy of any object of property leads back to an original accumulation. The legal system is a collection of these genealogies. The original accumulation, the violent capture of peoples and lands that must take place in order for there to be property, appears within the legal system as a time out of mind. To seek the future through legal means is to bow down before a certain tradition “of higher antiquity than memory or history can reach; nothing being more difficult than to ascertain the precise beginning and first spring of an ancient and long established custom.” This tradition, the unwritten law or *lex non scripta* of the kingdom, the common law, the foundation of our law, has been in place for “time out of mind; or, in the solemnity of our legal phrase, time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.”<sup>4</sup> The Middle Passage and Manifest Destiny, the original accumulation that provides the owners’ initial capital, belong to that time out of mind. The common law, the foundation of our law, then, comes to us from the time out of mind of the original dispossession.

Master and slave have nothing in common, other than the chains that bind. The parasitic or capitalist relation of the former to the latter is born of the division of the commons. The space of the master and the space of the slave are mutually exclusive. The time of the master cannot be the time of the slave. Space and time belong to the owner. Law and property perpetually remind the slave who owns what. Law and property also make the slave forget what time it is. The two processes—memory and forgetting—are related and can be observed in the slaves' search for lost time.

New Orleans is one of the oldest places in the New World. We live our childhood as our future. As with the individual, so with the collective, and so the tale of the city can be told as the tale of the child who grows up but never crosses the horizon of a traumatic event—a traumatic event that is never really over because it was never really understood. The trauma of the original accumulation, of slavery, is such a trauma. The white-over-black relationship, laid down in law and property, is parasitic and was so from the beginning, when the tracks were laid. Those tracks lead only in the direction of white over black, like rails to infinity. No help was ever coming to save the blacks from the flood. The levee broke long before any of the victims were born.

Property is a very curious thing:

Property—not the claim to use, but a right to prevent others from using—enables individuals who have appropriated the means of production, to hold in subjection all those who possess nothing but their vital energy, and who must work that they may live.<sup>5</sup>

Every object of property has a genealogy. The average black child today is born into a family with no net financial assets. Within the system of property, the legal system, then, she is an or-

phan. It could not be otherwise; she was orphaned before conception, she was orphaned by the original accumulation. When the black child, the child with nothing of her own, traces the genealogy of her dispossession, of her lost time, she finds nothing. It is as if she never existed. The black child was never meant to exist; that is the meaning of the racial mark, white over black, of the original accumulation. The search for lost time begins and ends in the station. Such abandonment is too much to be borne, too much to take. Abandonment is traumatic and therefore remembered only in the form of a screen memory, a scene that unfolds within a peculiar time outside of mind, and repeats. Such abandonment is what we saw unfold in the televised spectacle of blacks on rooftops hoping for helicopters that never stopped.

Our childhoods, say the psychoanalysts, remain with us complete and entire. Unbearable thoughts and feelings—and the memories associated with them—cannot be undone, but they can be forced underground. The unconscious is the space of such banished memories. Psychoanalytically, then, to “forget” early experiences or scenes is to repress them, to force them underground. Sometimes what actually took place is hidden (covered over or screened) by a replacement memory of a scene that never took place. Such screen memories themselves sometimes determine our future actions. These screen memories get hold of us with all the force of the original trauma, and thus we move backward into the future. The picture, the screen memory, seems to get hold of the mind in a peculiar way: “The patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.”<sup>6</sup> The more unbearable the memory, the greater the resistance, and “[t]he greater

the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering.”<sup>7</sup>

Black fidelity to law—witness the endless and fruitless search for equal rights and justice of “this species of property”—has to do with the hold of just such a peculiar screen memory. Black resistance to the memory of slavery takes the form of fidelity to the dream of equal rights and justice under law and, therefore, to the repetition of the original accumulation. “The first step in overcoming the resistances is made, as we know, by the analyst’s uncovering the resistance, which is never recognized by the patient, and acquainting him with it.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, sitting on a train as it slides through space, just behind the wall of sleep, there is a moment when everything falls away and one enters the time of the dream. In the time of the dream, it seems as if all things are possible, as if we can go home again. It is within the space of just such an “as if” that the black struggle for equal rights and justice takes place.

The black railway journey toward rights is a result of a picture, a scene, a screen memory, having got hold. The scene never took place. The scene is a screen memory; it hides the unbearable fact of the original accumulation. The Founding Fathers at the end of the line are the ones who instituted white over black; it is, therefore, not possible for the object of property to meet the Founding Fathers in the Promised Land. The object of property was made an object of property by the white slave master at the zero point of the very genealogy that it searches; it is therefore in search of lost time. The black experience of the railway is not only a metaphor; it runs through the black experience of the Jim Crow South and to the legal tracks laid down by *Homer Plessy*.

*Homer Plessy*, one-eighth black and by all appearances white,



and thus literally embodying all the contradictions of the mark, was arrested in 1892 for violating the law mandating separate railway carriages for whites and blacks. In the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Justice Henry Brown wrote for the majority and upheld “separate but equal,” citing *Roberts v. City of Boston*, an 1849 school segregation case.<sup>9</sup> Justice John Marshall Harlan, dissenting on the segregation point, agreed with the broader principle of white over black:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be *for all time*, if it remains true to its great heritage, and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty.<sup>10</sup>

For the *Plessy* majority *and* for the dissent, for white supporters and white opponents of segregation, white over black was to continue, as a certainty, “for all time.” Win or lose, *Brown v. Board I* and *Brown v. Board II*, every outcome of the quest for rights was to end in white over black, “for all time.” Fifty plus years after *Brown v. Board* turned Harlan’s dissent into the law of the land, the schools are still segregated. The black quest for rights, the search for lost time, begins and ends at the station. That is the meaning of “for all time.” The legal routes were all laid down, like rails to infinity, at the original accumulation.

When the levee broke, it was only as accidental as the original accumulation. When Amtrak was not used to save black souls from the rising waters of the flood, it was only as accidental as the original accumulation. There are no accidents. Every accident is an accumulation that has already taken place. Hurricane Katrina did not bring the first flood to New Orleans. Every natural disaster

strikes with the force of the original accumulation, that is, the slavery that predetermines, even prophecies, who will be drowned and who will be saved. All of these tragedies are fixed by the original dispossession in which who is to own and who is to be property is designated by a mark on the flesh, by white over black.

The screen memory that animates the black quest for equal rights and justice, the wait at the station, is of a kindly Founding Father welcoming them to the Promised Land. But blacks were *abandoned* in the station. There are no Founding Fathers for the blacks; at the end of the line, there are only slave masters, white owners, whose many mansions can all be traced back to the original dispossession. The picture of the Founding Fathers that animates the black quest for rights is, more or less, like this: "the rights of all, as they are settled and regulated by law, are equally entitled to the *paternal consideration* and protection of the law, for maintenance and security."<sup>11</sup>

That the portrait of the Founding Fathers' "paternal consideration" is a screen memory (screening the unbearable, traumatic memory of slavery) that has got hold of the blacks who endlessly and unconsciously refer to it in their legislative and litigative searches for lost time can be seen in the fact that the words just quoted are from *Roberts v. City of Boston*, the case cited in *Plessy* for the principle of "separate but equal."

Revisiting the trauma, that is, seeing the "paternal consideration" of the Founding Fathers as the screen memory it is, is difficult, but "[o]ne must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to work through it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work according to the fundamental rule of analysis."<sup>12</sup> And it takes time, which means that time must be taken

or seized. The "fundamental rule" of psychoanalysis is free association.

The group has a problem, the "black problem." The blacks are a group, not an individual; the free associations, accordingly, are to be found in the relations that individuals within the group form with each other. Their relations, forms of black interaction, reveal the trauma. Dispossession is traumatic. When the slaves are marked for slavery they are dispossessed of everything; it is the end of their world and the beginning of their master's world. Their flesh is marked as property, and because property cannot own property, the slaves can own nothing, not even the skin they are in. The violence of this dispossession is too great to be borne; the bodies and minds made to bear this unbearable violence are split apart, white over black. The patients have a symptom, the blacks wait for already-departed trains and progress, that is the way their trauma has frozen, so to speak, in the form of a symptom: the blacks wait at the station. White progress, on the other hand, is measured by how long the train's been gone. New Orleans figures in the history of the slave market and in the slave's post-Emancipation search for lost time. The train, Plessy's, seems much like the unused Amtrak line, and the flood is the major sign of the end of one era and the beginning of another, and that is what we think we want, a new era, by water or by fire. Because we repeatedly look down the tracks of law and property, waiting for a Founding Father to welcome us to the Promised Land of equal rights and justice, our struggles, on all the territories crossed by the rails, become their time. Our struggles become white time because they will always win. They will always win because the rails lead only to the station. Our eternal wait is what makes the time seem so very long.

We might do well, then, to look at the free associations made

during the flood. Free associations of blacks gathered to take food and water from stores and distribute them to those who were thirsty and hungry. These associations were not for profit, nor were they forced; they were free. The distribution of the goods expropriated from the owners was according to need, a need each individual was left free to assess on her own. The flood opened an opportunity for the healthy operation of the instinct for mutual aid. Direct action, as the Wobblies used to say, gets the goods. Some, not all, but enough, began working out new forms of cooperation and direct action to provide examples of a new time, began doing something that constituted a strike, not yet general, against the spectacle, and, more important, began working through the trauma of the original accumulation.

New forms, examples of what free associations can do to seize the time by taking direct action and working out diverse embodiments of the instinct for mutual aid, emerged from the floodwaters of New Orleans. Not many, but some examples, and even the smallest mustard seed . . . enough to seize the time. As the blacks who took direct action by expropriating and redistributing needed water and food demonstrated in New Orleans, another world is possible. It is possible to break this timeline. It is possible to turn away from the altar of self-sacrifice that is the station and by mutual aid end the repetition of the primal scene of accumulation. Undoing the original accumulation, white over black, requires the end of law and of property and the unraveling of this time altogether. The new beginning is somewhere after the General Strike, but total and accomplishable by those who have only their empty hands.

## NOTES

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1. Charlotte Wilson, "Freedom," in *Anarchist Essays* 57, 58 (Nicolas Walter ed., Freedom Press: 2000) (1886).
2. Luke 22:53 (King James version).
3. Slave spiritual, quoted in James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963).
4. *Blackstone's Commentary on the Laws of England*, book 1, section 1.
5. Charlotte Wilson, "Freedom," in *Anarchist Essays* 57, 58 (Nicolas Walter ed., Freedom Press: 2000), (1886). Wilson continues, "No work is possible without land, materials, and tools or machinery; thus the masters of these things are masters also of destitute workers, and can live in idleness upon their labour, paying them in wages only enough of the produce to keep them alive, only employing so many of them as they find profitable and leaving the rest to their fate. Such a wrong once realized is not to be borne." *Ibid.*
6. Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson); 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), vol. 12, 150.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) (citing *Roberts v. City of Boston*, 59 Mass. [5 Cush.] 198, 206 [1850]).
10. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 559 (1896) (Harlan, J., dissenting) (*italics added*).
11. *Roberts v. City of Boston*, 59 Mass. (5 Cush.) 198, 206 (1850).
12. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through."